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Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) — Not a Trump Issue

Introduction

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ABSTRACT Gwyneth Shanks discusses the scope of Not a Trump Issue, which privileges resistant actions that are never reducible to nor fully concerned with the Trump Administration's policies and actions. In the wake of the Administration's tacit and overt support of white supremacist and sexist ideologies, deregulation, global climate change denial, and attempts at voter suppression and the criminalization of communities of color, "Not a Trump Issue" questions how radical, anti-racist, feminist scholars, artists, activists, and educators can enunciate their own forms of resistance. The issue privileges actions that are engaged with surfacing deeper historical structures of inequity or dispossession; the issues at stake for the authors in "Not a Trump Issue" is not not Trump nor our political present, but always already our collective pasts.

Not-About-AIDS-Dance

In 1994 American choreographer Neil Greenberg premiered *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* at The Kitchen in New York. The work, for five dancers, was created over the course of a year in which Greenberg's brother passed away from AIDS-related complications; another dancer, Ellen Barnaby, lost her mother; and eight of Greenberg's close friends died from AIDS. The loss that marked the lives of the five dancers was conveyed to audience members through text projected on a scrim behind them. Wry and dry, at times darkly funny, and at other moments devastating in its simplicity, these texts created a kind of dance in counter time, in which the choreographed movement and the written words traced two distinct, yet entirely entangled, narratives. The movement phrases viewers watched were generated in rehearsals marked by loss; to dance, the piece proposed, was a process of moving through, with, and alongside the grief of death and the AIDS epidemic.

American poet D. A. Powell begins *Tea* (1998), the first collection in what some consider to be the poet's trilogy on the AIDS epidemic, with the line, "This is not a book about AIDS."¹ The "not" of Powell's opening sentence and the "not" of Greenberg's title are negatives that carry alongside themselves—like ghostly twins of those three letters—a "yes." It is a *not* that is always already a yes, a declaration, which acknowledges that to discuss, or not, a topic is to end up discussing much more. It is to wander, in the case of Greenberg and Powell, into discourses of memory, and childhood, death and dying, health care and homophobia. The title of this special edition of *Lateral*, "Not a Trump Issue," references Greenberg's dance (as well as such titular homages like Victoria Marks's 2007 *Not About Iraq* evening length dance) and Powell's prologue.

The "not" of the title here hopes to privilege resistant actions that are never reducible to nor fully concerned with the Trump administration's policies and actions. In the wake of the administration's tacit and overt support of white supremacist and sexist ideologies, deregulation, and global climate change denial, and increasingly successful attempts at voter suppression and the criminalization of communities of color, "Not a Trump Issue" questions how scholars, artists, and educators can enunciate their own forms of resistance. While "issue," in the title is an easy pun on the format of the journal issue, it also aims to privilege actions that surface deeper historical structures of inequity or

dispossession. This issue, in other words, is interested in how repudiation and activism, response and passivity, and the present and the past exist together; the issues at stake for the authors in “Not a Trump Issue” are not *not* Trump nor our political present, but always already our collective pasts.

Activating Defiance

In the waning minutes of the third and final 2016 US presidential debate, Donald Trump muttered, “Such a nasty woman,” into his microphone. Directed towards the Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, the comment spurred instantaneous responses from the political left. ‘Nasty woman’ became a rallying cry, emblazoned on t-shirts and re-appropriated by progressive elected officials, like Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. “Get this, Donald,” she stated at a campaign event for Clinton, “Nasty women are tough. Nasty women are smart. And nasty women vote.” A similar gesture of re-appropriative defiance animated the Women’s March, held on January 21, 2017. Challenging Trump’s boast that he could do anything to women, including grabbing “them by the pussy” without consent, protestors carried signs proclaiming messages like “This pussy grabs back.” While a host of resistant strategies and gestures emerged since Trump’s ascendance that depend upon the logic of re-contextualizing his own words, “Not a Trump Issue” is interested in other ways of activating and historicizing defiance.

While this type of re-contextualization of epithets into activist rallying calls is valuable, “Not a Trump Issue” takes heed of prior historical moments in which fascist regimes rose to power. In an opinion piece authored for *The Guardian*, scholars Yuliya Komska and Michelle Moyd describe the extent to which the rhetoric of the Nazi party permeated the press and everyday conversation.² Writers, attempting to counter the flowery and euphemistic double-speak of the Nazi regime, generated works that read more like lists. The very banality and straight-forwardness of the work aimed to puncture the genocide hidden within a phrase like, “the final solution.” Komska and Moyd go on to argue that current leftist organizers need to develop their own “vocabulary of resistance,” or, as they write in their co-authored essay here, “Appropriation is a tried-and-true resistance strategy, but it can result in mortgaged vocabularies, at best, if used exclusively.”

The twelve pieces included in this issue engage with and extend beyond the conventional parameters of academic publishing. Several threads emerge across the issue: the role language holds in shaping knowledge, power, and perceptions of “truth”; the way power undergirds perceptions of identity, yet often goes unexamined; how affective responses are shaped by national events as much as by far more intimate interactions, like those forged in a university classroom; and a prevailing sense of uncertainty, encompassing at once hope and fear. Without negating the need to counter the sexist, racist rhetoric and policies of the current administration, each piece proposes a mode of resistance that, in some way, sidesteps Trump in responding to Trumpism. It is a call to resist and oppose as much as it is an imagining of alternatives to longstanding historical conditions.

A handful of essays focus on performance and the performative power of language and protest. In their essay, [“Language Is a Public Thing,”](#) Komska and Moyd caution against, in these politically tumultuous times, the call of the manifesto. Instead they argue for a use of language that is “more inclusive, open-ended, solidary, moral, ethical, introspective, long lasting, binding, and action-oriented.” They conclude their piece arguing we must “‘think [about] what we are doing,’ and saying, every day,” finding ways to craft our everyday speech into modes of engagement that are cooperative and collaborative. This care for language, they note, “is everybody’s business.” Performance studies scholar Sheila Malone offers a [close reading of the chartered motorcycle club, *Dykes on Bikes*](#). She theorizes the noise of bikes’ exhaust pipes as a mode of sonic disruption that breaks

through hegemonic and normative practices and policies. “Political positions, political messages,” Malone writes, “and even policies are turned over through the tuning of air/exhaust systems.” In her [analysis of Oscar Arguello’s play *Sideways Fences* \(2017\)](#), Kimberly Chantal Welch reveals the way realist theatre’s inherent slippage between reality and representation serves as a means of destabilizing normative and discriminatory stereotypes that attach to Latina/o communities. While she frames the plot points of *Sideways Fences* through the Trump administration’s continued attacks on communities of color and those in poverty in the United States, Welch notes that such conditions are not new, but rather precede Trump and, indeed, in many ways are constitute of the nation’s founding. Such acts of, “domestic...terror against minorities are... not,” as Welch reminds us, “shocking,” nor are they new.

Ellen Gerdes, Christine Marks, Moustafa Bayoumi, and Sara Mitcho focus their contributions on questions of education, access, and academic and scholarly accountability. Beginning with the increasing castigation of “identity politics” by figures like Milo Yiannopoulos on university campuses, Gerdes explores the [role of progressive pedagogy](#). Cognizant that “institutions of higher education . . . [are] sites of . . . deep-seated inequities,” she, nevertheless, argues that, “we . . . need to prioritize teaching itself as a political act.” For Gerdes, drawing upon her training in dance studies, such political acts must leave room for embodied learning. Marks focuses her [interview with Moustafa Bayoumi](#) on the cultural studies scholar’s perceptions of Trump’s presidency some 178 days in. Ranging from Bayoumi’s scholarly monographs to the administration’s so-called Muslim Ban, the two discuss how cultural studies can allow for a “sober analysis” of what is “happening in the present.” In her essay, [“‘Truth’ in the Age of Trump.”](#) Sara Mitcho grapples with the tension between, on the one hand, critiquing positivism, long a theoretical and critical approach key to cultural studies, and, on the other hand, refuting Trump and his administration’s barrage of lies and obfuscations. Her essay is, as she writes, “ultimately [a call] for cultural studies scholars . . . to resist the urge to set down the tools of critical theory but instead to apply them with abandon to Trump [and] his policies.”

Ryan Blaine, Megan Wood, and Mimi Yang take up narratives that dominated the 2016 presidential election and the first year of the Trump administration. In their co-authored essay [“Not About White Workers: The Perils of Popular Ethnographic Narrative in the Time of Trump.”](#) Blaine and Wood analyze a series of ethnographic texts that focus on working class, white Americans—the disenfranchised white voter much discussed in the aftermath of Trump’s successful presidential bid. The two, however, analyze these texts not because of the narratives they offer about white America, but rather because, the two argue, such texts “tell us something about the formation of popular thought in relation to politics in the United States.” Such narratives, they conclude, are inadequate both in explaining our contemporary moment and in “the task of imagining better political futures.” In her piece, [“The Trump Wall: a Cultural Wall and a Cultural War.”](#) scholar Mimi Yang mounts a transhistorical analysis, framing how Trump’s use of the border wall during his campaign and into his presidency reveals not a groundswell of populist racism, but, instead, is woven into the discourses of American notions of freedom and democracy.

Finally, the issue includes a collection of responses from emerging and established artists. Chicano performance artist, photographer, director, and essayist Harry Gamboa Jr. offers a performative text entitled [“Missives and Other Un-Notes.”](#) In a series of disorienting vignettes, Gamboa skewers myths of US national identity, masculinity, and whiteness, placing readers in a dystopic world of violence, surveillance, and the constant threat of annihilation. Accompanying his text are a series of photographs from his performance troupe *Virtual Vérité* (2005–2017), in which some hundred performers, in Gamboa’s

words, “hopscotch their way across the various crevices and cracks of systemic breakdown to simulate the shattering effects of societal collapse while playing in the streets.” Carmen Wong offers documentation of her performance-installation, [#eatthatwall](#), first presented at Rhizome DC (a DIY experimental art space in Takoma Park, Washington, DC) in April 2017. In the piece, Wong invited gallery-goers to assist her in the construction (and consumption) of a wall made from small rice bricks set with refried bean mortar. Laurie Beth Clark and Michael Peterson discuss their piece [“Rage, Grief, Comfort &”](#) created through Spatula&Barcode, the social practice art collaboration the two founded. The project, which took place in December 2016, used foods like tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and sugar cookies to allow attendees to express their various affective responses to the results of the 2016 presidential election. Framing the project through a notion of slow politics, Clark and Peterson explore how social practice and food help inform our political present. Lindsay Garcia, an artist and PhD candidate in American Studies, offers the appropriated poem [No Pestilence at the Border](#) that details the “historical, rhetorical, and material entanglement” of rhetoric that links immigrations and pests in the United States.

There Wasn't Time

The last line of text that appeared in Greenberg's piece was, “There is more I wanted to do with this dance, but there wasn't time.” It is a sentiment that, as poet and scholar Jaime Shearn Coan writes, “speaks to the on-going-ness of AIDS-related deaths.”³ “There wasn't time,” then, reminds us of the nearness of death and the how that nearness is too often tied to the precarity of marginalization. Greenberg's sentiment echoes the one on which I wish to end.

We are in a time—as we were in the 1990s in regards to the HIV/AIDS epidemic; as we were prior to 1973 when access to abortion services was restricted by state and federal law; as we were in 1970 in Los Angeles when some 30,000 people took to the streets for the Chicano Moratorium; as we were prior to 1965 and the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act when entry into the US was tied to one's nation of origin; as we were in 1942 when President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066; as we were throughout the height of the Jim Crow era, during which some 4,000 black men, women, and children were lynched; as we were beginning in the late nineteenth century when the US government forcibly removed native children from their families and placed them in boarding schools; as we were throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century when working conditions were unregulated in the US—in which a state of precarity is all too present and pressing for many. As the authors in this issue propose, and as this exhaustive aside aims to demonstrate, we have always been in *this* time. The US is a country, after all, founded on colonial conquest and bolstered by chattel slavery. An answer, for those of us privileged enough not to be continually marginalized and rendered criminal by the current administration, is not to be caught in what we might call “Trump time,” a time of tweets and reactionary politics. Rather, the task of responding to racist, sexist, and violent ideologies does not end; it is an on-going practice and one that takes care, collaboration, noise, and empathy.

Notes

1. In his essay “‘I don't know what made this “private” in the first place.’: Neil Greenberg's Not-About-AIDS Dance,” poet and scholar Jamie Shearn Coan notes the relationship between Powell's poetry collection and Greenberg's dance piece. Jamie Shearn Coan, “‘I don't know what made this “private” in the first place.’: Neil Greenberg's Not-About-AIDS Dance,” in *Lost and Found: Dance, New York*,

HIV/AIDS, Then and Now (New York: Danspace Project, 2016), 235–247; D.A. Powell, *Tea* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), xi. [↗](#)

2. Yuliya Komska and Michelle Moyd, “Donald Trump is Changing Our Language. We Need a Language of Resistance,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/17/resist-donald-trump-vocabulary-resistance-rhetoric>. [↗](#)
3. Coan, 246. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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Gwyneth Shanks is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. She has a PhD in Theater and Performance Studies from the UCLA. Her work is at the intersections of performance and museum studies, and her book project, *Waterscapes: Film and Performance in Los Angeles*, focuses on the ways gender, race, and labor are revealed in the interplay between performance and urban ecologies. Shanks’s work has been published in *X-TRA*, *Performance Matters*, *Third Text*, and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Additionally, her work appears in the anthology *Theater/Performance Historiography: Time, Space, Matter*.



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